

Home	Leisure
News	Obituaries
Sports	Marketplace
Business	Site Map
Classifieds	Weather

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[Back to Index](#)
Published on 7/8/00
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Saturday Special

A hero comes full circle

St. Martinville native returns to remote island, thanks man who rescued him

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Advocate staff photo by Bryan Tuck
Medal of Honor receipient Jeff De Blanc sits in the back yard of his St. Martinville Home.

ST. MARTINVILLE -- How far would you go to thank someone 57 years after he saved your life with a bag of rice? Jeff De Blanc of St. Martinville traveled halfway around the world.

The U.S. Congress thanked De Blanc after World War II with the Medal of Honor for shooting down five Japanese planes even though his plane lacked enough fuel to return to base.

It's a story De Blanc, 79, has told many times, and he still retells the episode enthusiastically. And now De Blanc has an epilogue to his story after his trip to the South Pacific in May.

De Blanc was flight leader for a group of Marine Corps fighter planes escorting a dozen dive bombers assigned to cripple a Japanese supply ship in the Solomon Islands on Jan. 31, 1943.

Early in the flight, De Blanc realized his Wildcat fighter was using fuel faster than usual, but he decided not to turn back.

"I decided well hell I can't make it back, but I'll go ahead and lead the mission. We've got to get as many guns as we can up there or the dive bombers would be in trouble," De Blanc said. "I knew I could get far enough out of enemy

territory so when I bailed out it would be night-time."

The dive bombers missed their target, but one of De Blanc's comrades in another Wildcat hit the freighter Taro Maru, now a popular dive spot in the Solomons.

Here's how the Congressional Medal of Honor Society describes what happened:

Although his escort mission was fulfilled upon the safe retirement of the bombers, 1st Lt. De Blanc courageously remained on the scene despite a rapidly diminishing fuel supply and, boldly challenging the enemy's superior number of float planes, fought a valiant battle against terrific odds, seizing the tactical advantage and striking repeatedly to destroy 3 of the hostile aircraft and to disperse the remainder.

Prepared to maneuver his damaged plane back to base, he had climbed aloft and set his course when he discovered 2 Zeros closing in behind. Undaunted, he opened fire and blasted both Zeros from the sky in a short, bitterly fought action which resulted in such hopeless damage to his own plane that he was forced to bail out at a perilously low altitude atop the trees on enemy-held Kolombangara.

"The last one I shot, he was too anxious for the kill. When I saw him coming down I simply dropped the throttle, dropped my flaps and skidded," De Blanc said. "He fishtailed to stay on my tail, but he passed me up, and we looked at each other. I could recognize that man today. He knew he was a dead man."

De Blanc recalls glancing at his watch, turned to the inside of his wrist so he could get a quick look at the time without removing his hand from the stick. (He still wears his watch with the face on the inside of his wrist.)

"Right when I looked at my watch, a 20mm came right over my shoulder and knocked the watch off my wrist. Exploded right in the instrument panel and set it afire."

Another Zero disabled his plane by shooting at the engine.

"The shrapnel hit me, but that's beside the point."

In those days, planes weren't equipped with ejection seats.

"You had to get out on the wing and jump out," he said.

Just before splash-down, De Blanc detached from the parachute to prevent getting trapped under the canopy and rigging.

"What I thought was 10 feet was over 60 feet. By the time I hit that water, I was so far under I could see that refractive light of the sun setting. I had to pop my Mae West (air-filled life vest) to get up."

After swimming several hours, De Blanc dragged himself onto a beach where he fell asleep and was awakened by rain.

De Blanc stayed in a tree overnight, then at first light followed a path into the rain forest where he found a clearing with an abandoned hut.

"I heard the birds singing. Now I was reared in the swamps here. When the birds are singing everything is OK."

He stayed at the hut and, upon awakening on the fourth morning, he noticed that the birds were silent.

"And then I knew I was in trouble. When I looked out the hut there was a native, a short native with a bone through his nose. He had a machete, and he was grinning. He wasn't but 5 feet tall, so I knew I could handle him."

The native had six others with him, and the native poked at De Blanc's sunburned skin, appearing amused at how it turned white.

"In my mind they are head hunters because they look like it."

The natives took him by canoe to a village where he was kept under guard.

De Blanc said one native demanded De Blanc's Marine Corps belt buckle.

De Blanc said a Marine Corps instructor had advised pilots that, if native captors took something from them, they should reciprocate.

"When he took my belt buckle, I grabbed his spear, and there it is on my wall."

The 9-foot decorative spear, finely decorated yet menacing, hangs on the wall of his modest home.

De Blanc said he figured the natives were preparing to take him to the Japanese for a bounty. But then a native from the area arrived.

"I like the way he handled himself, a very forceful man. He looked like a leader.

"This guy came in and threw down a 10-pound sack of rice which he stole from the Japanese. He threw it down at their feet, and they picked it up and

let me go. From then on I felt safe."

"The way he took over and the way he handled those people, I knew I was in safe hands."

De Blanc wore an enemy uniform, thinking that from a distance he could pass for a Japanese soldier. The natives had taken the uniform from the Japanese.

He said his rescuer took him to a British missionary, who warned that the Japanese would arrive the next day.

He was shuttled to the Coast Watchers, a group of Australians, English and natives who protected downed pilots, and radioed Allies about Japanese planes and ships movements.

After 15 days behind enemy lines, De Blanc was finally picked up by a Navy flying boat, three days before his 23rd birthday. He returned to his unit and later flew Corsair fighters, shooting down four additional Japanese aircraft.

After the war, De Blanc married his high school sweetheart, Louise, and he taught math and physics in St. Martin Parish, later becoming a school system supervisor. He now writes grants for the school system.

De Blanc said that, while he was staying with the natives, he didn't get his rescuer's name, but years later he wanted to meet the man.

"After they saved my life I said I wanted to meet those guys and go full circle."

He met several Coast Watchers including Henry Josselyn of England and John Keenan of Australia who helped him and many other stranded allied personnel, but not his guardian angel from the Solomons.

During his travels, he obtained a copy of a diary kept by Keenan and Josselyn. From the diary, he finally found out the native's name, Atitao Lodukolo, or Ati, and through more research De Blanc learned of his whereabouts.

In May, De Blanc traveled to the Solomons to find Ati, and to assist the local residents with establishment of a war memorial effort. Violence had returned to the islands in the form of civil unrest.

"When we went down there, they just cut one of the heads off one of the Guadalcanal natives and took his body at 4 o'clock in the morning and put it in the town square so everybody could see it the next day."

To get to Ati's village, De Blanc took a harrowing plane ride, followed by a boat ride across a lake to the remote village, and the visit had to be kept short

to avoid a building storm.

De Blanc said he had some doubt that this 95-year-old feeble man who had to use a walking stick could be the same robust, strapping native who fiercely protected him.

But Ati asked about De Blanc's spear, then the Japanese uniform, and finally about a second wristwatch De Blanc had in his pocket. De Blanc admits he had almost forgotten about that tropical watch he bought in Australia. He said he carried the watch to see if it could withstand high altitudes.

From those questions, De Blanc was certain that this was his rescuer.

A videotape of the reunion shows De Blanc giving Ati a parting salute, and the old man returns the gesture.

"How 'bout that? That's full circle," De Blanc said, stopping the video.

[Top of page](#)

SITE INDEX

HOME: [About Us](#) | [Archives](#) | [Help](#) | [Search](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Subscribe](#)

NEWS: [AP Wire](#) | [Elections](#) | [Health news](#) | [Legislature](#) | [Police Briefs](#) | [Religion](#) | [School News](#) | [Science](#) | [Smiley](#)

SUBURBAN [Acadiana](#) | [Baker, Zachary, Felicianas](#) | [Florida parishes](#) |
NEWS: [River parishes](#) | [Westside](#)

WEATHER: [Current Weather](#)

SPORTS: [ECHL hockey](#) | [High school sports](#) | [LSU sports](#) | [Outdoors](#) |
[New Orleans Saints](#) | [SEC FanaticZone](#) | [Southern University](#) |
[Team Schedules](#)

PEOPLE: [Obituaries](#) | [Food](#) | [Teen Stuff](#)

LEISURE: [Movies](#) | [Television](#) | [Music](#) | [Books](#) | [Comics](#) | [Horoscopes](#) | [Crossword](#) |
[Wordsearch](#) | [Travel](#) | [Personals](#)

BUSINESS: [Briefs](#) | [Technobabble](#) | [Motley Fool](#)

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